

Ep. #279: The 4 Things Kids Do When You Say No (And Exactly What to Say)



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host
Lisa Smith

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Welcome to Real World Peaceful Parenting, a podcast for parents that are tired of yelling, threatening, and punishing their kids. Join mom and master certified parent coach, Lisa Smith, as she gives you actionable step-by-step strategies that'll help you transform your household from chaos to cooperation.

Let's dive in.

Welcome, welcome, welcome. Welcome to today's episode. I am thrilled to be with you here today. Now, before we dive in, last week in episode 278, we talked about screens and why they're not a coping skill, and if you haven't listened to that one yet, I really want you to go back after this because it pairs perfectly with what we're doing today.

But right now, I wanna start with the moment. Let's say it's that time that you've decided, and you've held firm, and you've said to yourself, "This time, I'm gonna follow through," and you mean it. You genuinely mean it, and then your kid comes at you. Maybe they negotiate. Maybe they escalate. Maybe they look you right in the eye and say something cutting, so perfectly aimed at your softest spot that your chest just sinks, and you find yourself either yelling back, caving, or saying something you spend the rest of the day regretting.

And afterward, you're not even mad at them. You're mad at yourself because you had it. You were right there. Yeah? Yeah. Well, here's what I want you to hear right now. That collapse is not a character flaw, it's not a weakness, and it's not proof that peaceful parenting isn't working or that you're a bad parent.

It's what happens when you don't know what's coming, when your kid does something in the moment that catches you completely off guard, and your nervous system responds before your brain can catch up. Okay? And today, I wanna help you with that because here's the thing about kids and limits. They push back, and they push back in completely predictable ways, all of them, every single time.

The names are different, the ages are different, the battles are different, but the patterns? The patterns are the same, and once you can name what's happening in real time, you can stop getting knocked off your feet by it. Today, we're gonna talk

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about the four things kids do when you hold a limit and exactly what to say when they do it.

So as Tom Brady would say, let's go. All right. Before we get into the four patterns, I want to take a couple of minutes for anyone who's newer to this work, because I want to make sure we're all starting from the same place. When I talk about a limit, I'm not talking about a punishment. I'm not talking about threatening or counting one, two, three, or taking things away in anger.

A limit in the way I teach it is a pre-planned, calm, and consistent response to a specific behavior. Or you might think about it as a consistent boundary or rule with a consequence to a specific behavior. And the word pre-planned is doing a lot of work in this sentence, because here's what I see happen with most parents.

A behavior occurs. You're already activated, and then you come up with a consequence on the spot from that place. And what comes out in those moments is always either too harsh to actually enforce or so vague it means nothing. Limits that hold are made from your calm brain before the moment arrives. The structure I teach is simple.

You say to your kids, "If you choose X, if you choose to do X, or if you choose not to do X, then Y will happen." If homework isn't done by dinner, electronics will wait until the homework's done. If curfew is missed without a call, next weekend you stay home. If the iPad doesn't go off when the timer sounds, it's gone for the day.

When you preset the limit, something important shifts. When the moment comes, you're not making a decision, you're executing one. The limit was already decided. You just have to hold it. And that's exactly where we're going today, because holding it and actually holding it when your kid is right in front of you coming at you with everything they have, well, that's the part that nobody teaches you until now.

So here's the reframe I want you to carry into the rest of this episode. If your kid accepts your limit without any pushback at all, then the truth is it may not actually be a limit. It might be a suggestion they happen to agree with. Because here's what

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I know after 18 years of parent coaching. Real limits bump us against our kids' wants.

Heck, real limits bump up against adult wants, like speed limits. And then what happens is their nervous system responds. They push, they resist, they come at you, not because they're bad kids, but because they're kids, and this is developmentally normal, and this is them doing exactly what they're supposed to do, and this is their nervous system reacting exactly as it's going to react at that age.

So what I want you to hear is pushback from your kid is not a sign that the limit is wrong. It's a sign that the limit landed. The question is not whether pushback will come. It will, probably every time. The question is whether you'll know what it looks like when it gets there, and what you'll say when it does, and that's what I wanna help you with today.

So let's dig into the four patterns. Pattern number one that many of us get from our kids is negotiation. "Can I just finish this level? Can I do it tomorrow instead? Just this once. I promise I'll never ask again. If I clean my whole room later, can I have five more minutes?" Right? You know these. You know the negotiator.

Most of us that have a negotiator swear that our kid will make an amazing attorney one day. Now, this is the most civilized form of pushback, which makes it the sneakiest, because your kid is melting down, because your kid isn't melting down in a dramatic way, and they're probably not even being disrespectful, and we could even argue that they're being reasonable.

They have a counterproposal, and if you're a thoughtful parent who values your kid's voice, which you are or you wouldn't be here, it's tempting to engage, right? But the moment you engage, you send a signal, and the signal is this limit is a conversation, and once it's a conversation, you're in a negotiation, and in a negotiation with a kid who wants what they want, you're not on a level playing field.

You may not even realize you've entered a negotiation, but you have. So when this is happening to you, here's what I want you to say to your kids. "I hear you really

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want to negotiate this. I hear that, and yet we're gonna stick to the rule," or, "My decision is made," or, "We decided this well in advance, and it's written on the contract on the refrigerator."

Or you could say, "I, I know you want this, and the answer is still no." Or you could say, "We can talk about how you feel. We're not going to debate the limit right now." Notice what's happening in those responses. You're not being cold. You're not dismissive. You're acknowledging your kid and what they want.

You're just not moving with the negotiation. Soft heart, strong spine, both things at the same time. The key phrase that will save you here is, "We've already made this decision," or, "We've already set this rule." Not just no, though that works, too, but specifically, we've already addressed this, because you have.

Before you walked into this moment, you made this decision from your calm brain. You're not choosing again right now. You're not using confusion to change your mind. You're not negotiating the limit in the middle of enforcing it. You're just holding something that already exists. Make sense? Okay, pattern number two is escalation.

This is the one that goes from zero to 100 faster than you can track. Maybe the negotiation didn't work, and the kid starts to panic that they're not gonna get what they want, so the feelings get bigger and louder. Your kid might yell. They might slam a door. They might throw something. Say things they don't mean in a tone they absolutely do mean in that moment.

And during escalation, here's what happens to most parents when the escalation hits. You either match your kid's energy, the escalation, or you leave. You either get bigger, too, your voice goes up, your energy spikes, or you just completely shut down and walk away. Now, what I know is that both of those responses are coming from your own nervous system getting activated, and both of them teach your kid same thing, getting louder changes something.

I can change my parents' energy with escalation. Now, they're not realizing this on a conscious level, but here's what you want your kid to learn. Getting louder changes nothing. That's why we don't wanna escalate with them. Instead, here's

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what we wanna say. "I can see you're really upset. You're signaling that to me, and I'm still not changing my mind."

My favorite one is, "Getting louder won't change my answer. I'm right here when you're ready to talk." You can also say, "I love myself too much to let you talk to me that way. I'm gonna take a minute, and I'll be right back." What you're doing in those moments is staying warm while being immovable. You're not being cold.

You're not punishing them for escalating their feelings, but you're also not taking the bait. Their escalation is an invitation to fight, and you do not have to accept that invitation at all. Pattern number three is the guilt bomb. Oh, the guilt bomb. As a recovering people pleaser, this one used to wrap me around the axle big time.

It goes something like, "You don't even care about me. I hate you. You're the worst parent ever. My friend's parents let me- let them do everything. You never trust me. You don't trust me. I wish I lived somewhere else." Now, this one, the guilt bomb, let's be honest, it hits different from the others. Negotiation and escalation are about the limit.

The guilt bomb is about you. They've made it personal. Your kid has stopped trying to win the argument and started trying to make you doubt yourself. Again, maybe not consciously, but because they know. They always know exactly where our soft spots are. They grew up on top of them. The guilt bomb works by making you feel, in the span of three seconds- Like holding this limit means you're a bad parent.

It makes you feel, or at least question, if love and limits can coexist, and it makes you consider that if you really cared about your kid, you'd give in. I wanna tell you about a night with Malcolm. He was 14, and we had a very clear limit around going to friends' house on school nights. It didn't happen, full stop.

He knew this. He'd known it for years. And one Tuesday evening, he came to me with this whole argument planned. His friend was having people over, and it was important. It, it would only be for a couple hours, and he would get all his t- work done first. I listened. I really did. And then I said, "No." And he was quiet for a

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second, and then he looked me right in the eye and said evenly, "You know what, Mom?"

Sometimes I feel like you don't actually want me to have a life." And I wanna be honest with you about what happened in my body in that moment. Something dropped like a stone because he wasn't yelling. He wasn't being dramatic. He said it quietly, and he meant it, and it landed exactly the way he intended it to.

The version of me that didn't know what I know now would've backpedaled, would've overexplained, would've overjustified, would've tried to prove to him that I did want him to have a life. "No, you don't understand. I do. I, I really do, honey. I, I think your life is amazing, and I'm here for you, and I want you to have a life."

And, and I would've just talked and talked and talked, tried to get him to see my point of view, tried to convince him, tried to justify to him why I was saying no. And while I was doing all that, I might have caved entirely just to make that big feeling go away. But instead, I took a deep breath, and I said, "I hear you, and the answer is still no, and I love you."

And y'all, that was it. I didn't debate whether I was a good parent. I didn't list my evidence. I didn't chase him down the hall to make sure he knew I loved him. I just held it, and he was annoyed with me for the rest of the evening. He was annoyed, for sure, and the next morning he was fine. We moved on with our day.

And you know what he learned? He learned that the limit doesn't move when he goes to the soft spot. He learned that I can hold a limit and love him at the same time, and he can have big feelings about hearing no. He also learned that holding a limit and love, those two things are not in conflict. Those can hold.

I can hold a boundary or a limit or a rule and still love people. This is one of the most important things your kid will ever learn from you, and they can only learn it if you hold the limit when there's pushback. Here's what to say when the guilt bomb lands. "You can be mad at me, and I still love you. I know it feels that way right now."

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I love you, and the limit is still the limit. You can say, "I hear that you're furious with me, and that's okay. I'm not changing my mind." You can say something like, "I can tell you're really upset and having big feelings, and I love us enough for both of us right now." You're not defending yourself. You're not arguing about what kind of parent you are.

You're not presenting a persuasive argument like a attorney at a closing argument. You're staying in the limit with your heart open. That is the move. That's the move. Yeah? Okay. And then let's talk about the last pattern, passive resistance, also known as the stall. Oh, this one. Ooh-wee. This is the quiet one, the no big feelings, the no dramatic words, just nothing happening.

Maybe it shows up as your kid pretends not to hear you, or moves in slow motion, or goes limp, or stares at their phone, or takes four times as long to put their shoes on, or suddenly becomes very interested in a wall, or won't get out of the car when it's time. The stall is sneaky because there's nothing obvious to respond to, which means most parents default to repeating themselves, and then repeating again, and then repeating again urgently and louder.

And by the fifth or sixth time, you're the one, the parent, who's escalating over nothing apparently because your kid has barely moved. Here's what's happening. Every time you repeat the request, the request loses weight. Your kid learns through this pattern that the first three asks don't count. Nothing is actually happening, your kid learns, until you reach a certain volume or pitch or tone, so they wait because the waiting's always worked.

So the solution here is to stop repeating. Say it once and let the silence work for you. Here's what you can say. You can say, "I noticed you didn't move. The answer is still the same." You can say, "I'm going to stop asking, and I'll sit here with you for a minute while your brain catches up." You can also say, "We're leaving in three minutes whether your shoes are on or not.

I'll help if you need me." The presence is the move here. You're not walking away in frustration. You're also not spiraling into repeated requests with raised volume, stressed tone. You're, you're just there. You're calm. You're waiting, which is a

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very different energy than urgency, and your kid's nervous system knows the difference.

Now, I could give you much more detailed scripts for every single one of these patterns, and you could memorize every word. But I'm not gonna do that because the truth is, scripts don't work- If you don't stay regulated, or you're trying to recite the memorized scripts from a dysregulated nervous system.

A script delivered from a dysregulated nervous system can sound like sarcasm. It sounds like barely contained anger. It sounds like you're reciting something to avoid exploding, and your kid will feel that, and then they push harder. So before you say anything, before you say any of the lines that I've suggested today, or the ones you come up with on your own, here's what I want you to do first.

And for those of you that have been listening for a while, my suggestion is not gonna surprise you. Can you guess what it is? I'll wait. Before you say anything, you pause. Pause for three seconds, feet flat on the floor, one slow breath out through your nose, and then before you open your mouth, you say something to yourself.

Not out loud, just inside. Here's what I want you to say, "I chose this limit from my higher brain. I'm not choosing it again right now. I'm enforcing it." This sentence does a lot of work. It reminds you that you've already made the decision while you were calm and in your prefrontal cortex, or your logical brain.

That it reminds you that what's happening in your body right now, the urge to yell, or to cave, or to over-explain, is just your nervous system responding to the pushback, and you don't have to obey that urge or give into it. You just have to hold the thing that is already decided ahead of time. Three seconds, one big deep breath in and out, say the sentence in your brain, "I chose this limit from my higher brain.

Right now I'm enforcing it," and then you speak. This is how athletes train, by the way. They don't think through every move in the middle of a game. They've practiced, or front-loaded as we call it, until the response is automatic, until there's

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muscle memory. This is the same thing. I want you to train your nervous system so that when the pushback comes, you don't have to decide how to respond.

You just execute, and you don't renegotiate the limit in the middle of executing it. Okay? Let me tell you about a mom named Tara. Tara came to me with an eight-year-old son, we'll call him Nate, who had figured out with impressive precision exactly how to get out of any limit Tara tried to set. He'd negotiate first, and when that didn't work, he'd escalate.

And if escalation didn't move her, he'd land a guilt bomb so targeted that Tara told me sometimes she didn't even realize what had happened until she had already given back whatever she'd taken away. When she joined the Hive, she told me in our first conversation, "Lisa, I feel like I'm being outsmarted by an eight-year-old.

And the worst part is," she said, "I think I am." And- What I noticed right away was that Tara was setting limits in the moment, making decisions under pressure from an activated place. Most of the time, her nervous system was on a low boil on a back burner, and then Nate would make a request, and because she was making decisions under pressure, her nervous system, the pot of boiling water, would go from a low boil to a completely rapid boiling w- pot of water instantaneously.

And what Nate had subconsciously learned, or maybe better accurately said, what Tara had trained him to n- through her actions, was that limits set that way were soft, that the limit would bend if he pushed in the right spot. And he wasn't doing this maliciously. I don't even think eight-year-olds know that they're doing this.

He was doing what kids do. He was pushing back. He was testing to find the edges and adjusting his strategy based on what worked, as many strong-willed kids do. So we started with one limit, just one: screen time after school. When the timer went off, the iPad went off, and if the iPad didn't go off within five minutes of the timer, not seven, not nine, but five, there was no iPad the next day, just for one day.

So she said it calmly on a Sunday and communicated it to Nate about five times, wrote it on the fridge. They would look at it and talk about it. They even role-played it, okay? And every time she would discuss this with Nate, he would just

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shrug his shoulders. So of course, here we go. It's Monday. After school, he's on his iPad, and the timer goes off, and Nate negotiates, and she uses the line, "I know you want more time, but the answer is no."

So then he escalates, and so she said, "I know this is upsetting to you, but getting louder isn't gonna change my mind. The answer is no." And then he deployed the guilt bomb. "You never let me do anything fun." And Tara admitted this is the part that took everything she had, but she looked at him and said, "I hear you.

I love you. iPad is done for today." He was furious, y'all. He stomped away, threw the iPad on the couch and stomped away and slammed his bedroom door. Tuesday was harder. Wednesday was the same, and then sometime in the second week, something shifted. The timer went off, and Nate put the iPad down. He wasn't happy about it.

He made sure she knew he wasn't happy about it, but he did it. And Tara shared with us a few weeks later, "It's like he stopped trying, not because he gave up, but because he figured out it wasn't gonna work anymore." And then she said, "And honestly, he seems less anxious, like he finally knows where the edge is."

Yeah, that's what consistent limits do. They don't just change the behavior, they settle something in your kid's nervous system. Because kids who live inside clear, predictable limits feel safer than kids who don't. Even if they fight you every step of the way, they're looking for the edge, and when they find it, when it holds, they relax into it.

Now, Tara didn't change Nate's personality. She suddenly didn't have an easy kid. She didn't have a kid that didn't wanna play on his iPad. She didn't have a kid that was happy to turn it over when the timer got off, and got up and did a dance because he was done playing on the iPad. She just stopped being someone he could move, and that changed everything.

Everything. So I've got some homework for you. There's two things this week, and both of them are concrete. Homework number one, pick one recurring limit in your house, one thing that turns into a battle on a regular basis, and set it in advance

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using the if/then structure. Write it down. Say it to your kid in a calm moment, not in the heat of one.

"Hey, I wanna be clear about how this is gonna work going forward." And remind him 10 times. Role play it. Write it on the fridge. And then when the moment comes, you're not deciding. You're not renegotiating. You're just holding... You're just executing and holding something that already exists. Homework two, print or screenshot the four patterns.

We'll place those over on Instagram this week. Print or screenshot the four patterns, negotiation, escalation, guilt bomb, and stall. Put it somewhere you'll actually see it. And this week when the pushback comes, and it will, just name it in your head. Even if you don't get the response perfectly right, naming it in real time changes something.

It moves you out of reaction and into awareness. It moves you from stimulus, reaction, into stimulus, pause, and respond. And awareness is always, always the beginning of change. And here's the line I want you to take away from today. A limit held with a soft heart is the most generous thing we can give our kids.

Not a softer limit, a held one with warmth. That, my real-world peaceful parent, is parenting leadership. It's peaceful parenting leadership. That is what your strong-willed kid is actually looking for, even when everything about their behavior says otherwise. You're not trying to break them. You're not trying to win.

You're trying to be the steadiest person in the room. And every time you hold that line, even imperfectly, you're building something in your kid that lectures and punishment and dominance and permissivity can't. You're building emotional intelligence. Okay, until next time. I'm wishing you peaceful parenting.

Thanks for listening to Real World Peaceful Parenting. If you want more info on how you can transform your parenting, visit thepeacefulparent.com. See you soon.